

Masthead Logo

The Iowa Review

Volume 14

Issue 2 *Spring-Summer: Writing From the World:
Selections from the International Writing Program
1977-1983*

Article 82

1984

From "The World in Two Days"

George Balaita

Ioanna Deligiorgis

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/iowareview>

Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Balaita, George and Ioanna Deligiorgis. "From "The World in Two Days"." *The Iowa Review* 14.2 (1984): 212-221. Web.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.3075>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Iowa Review by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact lib-ir@uiowa.edu.

from THE WORLD IN TWO DAYS

JUDGE VIZIRU, in his notes, claims to have known one of the physicians who took care of Anghel for a period of time. Lambrino, like many psychiatrists, was collecting and filing documents about the patients' behavior (due to professional interest, literary ambition, boredom, or a mixture of those reasons). This Doctor Lambrino, in his turn, claims that Anghel, who's an unusual case, carries on lengthy monologues, sometimes lasting several hours, in front of the window. His outbursts of anger are rare, are in general inoffensive and, besides, the monologue is really a stammering while his eyes are fixed on the big oxygen tubes lined up behind the bars in the low shed behind the tall ramp where the engines get washed in the hospital's back yard. At the same time he assumes an almost angry, concentrated look (his eyes, the yellowish froth that hangs at the edges of his mouth, the chills that shake his shoulders show it) but aside from that he is serene and dignified, asks for a shovel and a spade, digs a hole which he fills again right away. He is knowledgeable and useful in gardening and still retains knowledge of repairing watches, his old craft. The hospital employees trust him totally with their watches. He might some day mix all those little wheels together, but that day hasn't come yet. What is strange and also an exception to his kind of malady is that he doesn't have any sexual obsessions. In spite of my best professional judgment and experience there have been moments when I would allow him to join society, Dr. Lambrino states. But isn't he sick? No doubt he is, though in the long run what do I know about my own sanity except the common assumptions we are so sure of.

Lambrino has installed a tiny microphone under the window sill where Anghel carries on his monologues. He transcribed them from the tapes to a notebook which was given to the judge "for two days only." Viziru, according to what he had said, wanted to transcribe, for his own use, what seemed to be Anghel's monologue, not the doctor's comment. It is strange that the text, at least in the form that Viziru got, is coherent. On the surface, the author doesn't seem to be either mentally disturbed or very normal. Sure enough, both Viziru and Doctor Lambrino are trustworthy, but sometimes man's mind works against him. The texts,

nevertheless, are transcribed here once more. (Judge Viziru remembers the story about Apollodorus of Phalerum. A friend asks him about Agathon's banquet which Socrates, Alcibiades and others attended. Apollodorus tells his friends that he was only a child at the time but he has heard about it from somebody called Phoenix of Phillipi who had heard about it from Aristodemus Kydathenaeus who used to wander around barefoot who probably had heard about it from somebody else . . . so it seems that somebody knows something about somebody else at all times. According to Judge Viziru this chain by which we hear things could well be a universal truth. He may be exaggerating! Still he believes it.)

. . .

Anghel:

I used to shine mirrors and was a silversmith too. Old and pretentious crafts. I learned them in a mystical, Central European city where completely out of the blue I had a revelation of my own importance. At that time I did not yet know which direction I was going to take. This is the place where I felt the *world*, there I listened to how mercury boils inside a glass and I observed lead steaming out of a container covered with a stone lid. In the Orient, where I found myself later and where I learned the true meaning of existence in this world, I never saw again such a golden twilight as that on the Goldsmith's street. Nor did I see it on the deep and dry valley near the Great Wall where I was staying in a clay house surrounded by a clay wall built on the edge of a clay field that was no bigger than the oak floor of my old master's studio in Mala Strana. I was trying to gain wisdom from the book of Chuang-Yung or learn about the Invariable Middle from a poor palanquin carrier who happened also to be a caretaker in the Garden of the Late Orchids which was the property of a low-grade mandarin, a drunkard who after partying the night before would vomit in the morning inside a gold-plated porcelain bowl, and who would carefully collect his dues of the previous hard night because, as he was saying, he doesn't like drinking but he does it only because he hopes to find the essence, which would be a seed, condensed by the alcoholic reaction. So he collected his vomit in perfectly sealed vases and put it all inside a big copper container with handles like elephant ears. He was certain that

after a few years he would succeed in knowing the depth of his physical being, through repeated condensations followed by long exposures to the sun's light and heat, thus affecting the process of crystallization of the seed that hadn't been found yet.

everybody there thought that I was a simple watch repairman in a big city, on Undisturbed Quietness Street. I was working on clocks and watches, a craft which I hadn't learned from anybody. I was born knowing it or rather I gradually learned it, and I'll never forget it, in the same way that you learn to speak, or from an insect you slowly become a camel; and when I had free time I withdrew in the shade of the Great Wall and meditated. I was preparing myself for the ultimate goal because by then I knew what I had to do and that I had to find *the mirror*.

and in the dark, golden city I was a cleaner of mirrors and a blacksmith. There I was living near the Synagogue Klaus at the house of Master Keila Bohm Adolf, a man who was alone, like me, a well-read and wise man whom I later abandoned as I did the palanquin carrier and the Book about the Invariable Middle and Blahouse, the goldsmith, and Cornelius, the physician, and all those whom I had come across before I discovered that my true goal was the mirror.

when I would walk through the Rabbi Low Cemetery and would see the old trees and the grey reddish stones, tombs next to each other, that propitious place of high spirits, thousands of small stones placed at the edges of big stones, each one a meditation and a big thought and the rabbi's spirit that lived inside a man made of clay, Judah Liva ben Bezaler the illustrious Maharal. I would forget everybody, everybody was far away from me.

how dark was the Jewish city within the golden city! If only I were a student of Hus! Does the sun create gold on the rooftops? I never believed it. Lead is more precious.

on Goldsmith's street the roofs are pitched and made of tin and the walls look like tall white screens, though they are real walls, and the rooms are small and if you pay close attention you can see that everything is made of fired earth, red, yellow and orange and white enamel and under it sand, fired and melted until it has almost become glass. You great goldsmiths who are dead now, from where you are you can see just a simple fence, a house's threshold and some flowers; and the facades have a cornice, made either of cement or of a concoction of corn flour hardened with egplantine and crushed glass.

while I was working with the glass and the metal I was learning quite a lot about people. I am not referring to the time I was overseeing, with a merciless eye, the mixing of sulfur, mercury and cobalt and would let them bubble freely to achieve something or other. Now I can think. I lean my back against wood or stone and I see the grass. The sun burns. A lizard stares at me with human eyes. A tortoise doesn't avoid me. Man's soul is hidden and eternal. I have not known women. They are dangerous beings and untrustworthy. Vipers are friendlier and more useful. When the rooster crows I turn and face west. When I eat a piece of fruit and hold the black, shining seeds in my hands, I sense a tremendous power growing inside me. This happens now. I didn't always know. I haven't been to schools, I have learned everything alone. I have done everything alone. Father Zota, a man who'd give away even his education for a drink, comes to me. I see how he drinks. I don't like wine or hard liquor. But I know how to make all sorts of drinks. My cherry brandy is good enough for any guest.

I am talking to Father Zota. He tells me that I am damned; he laughs and says that he too is damned. The grave digger comes and shows me a round bone. Where would it be from, from which part? He feels his lean body to find the place where the bone which he found on the ground could fit. No luck. He puts the bone inside his big pocket and goes to dig somewhere else.

metal, glass fires and mechanical games suddenly stopped being a mystery for me. I abandoned them. I might have become wiser than before when I did not know them, but the mirror was still remaining out of my reach. So I became a boatman, a kind of ferryman who takes you to the other side. With the money I saved from this job I made a big bell which I threw in the water of the dark river. And now, during the endless crossings, when the boat reaches the middle of the river and there is no current, the souls can suddenly hear the deep and melodious sounds created by the fish bumping against my bell.

once I stood waiting for quite some time on the other shore of the river. No one showed up. I was not worried. Charon had warned me: The hyperborean currents are unforeseen, their fury sometimes knows no limits. Therefore they scatter the souls in rarefied zones of the ice cap, to wander there for a long time until they pay their dues. So relax, Anghel, our job is not one of those that lose their importance. His joke seemed light-minded to me, I was a conscientious ferryman. I never thought of taking my job lightly. Jokes destroy human actions. If you

want to get where you intend you must remain serious and incorruptible. I couldn't say that to Charon, but I realized then that I can be, actually I am, more powerful than he. So I was sitting, resting at my oars. I dozed off and when I opened my eyes I saw a midget on the shore, looking neither bad nor good, neither very fat nor very thin. He was in tails of red-raspberry color; his starched shirt shone in the murky light of the river shore. His round cheeks were impressed with a bold and provoking smile, but all it took was for me to lift my head from my tired hands and the oars began to ripple lightly the water that had withdrawn from shore, and as I straightened my back, his arrogance turned into humbleness.

I am Pavel Ivanovici Chichicov, he told me, I am a college counselor, sir, I travel for personal reasons. I waited there a little longer, but no one else showed up. He kept quiet as he stared at the ground. Come aboard, I told him. He did it easily, he was surprisingly agile for his build; the boat didn't move at all. Before I had time to move the oars twice, he came up to me. He was walking on the boat very steadily, without stumbling like others, as if he had spent all his life on a boat. His expression was cunning now, his slippery eyes were continuously fixed on me, his earlier silence gave way to a chatter that was not lacking charm. He started to question me about my job, was it monotonous, was it hard, was it easy and gradually without much ado he asked where *they* head when they reach *their* shore. How do they behave on the boat and what do they do when they reach the shore. How far away are the populated zones on the other side, what attracts them, what pleases them, what frightens them and so on. I was keeping silent but this did not prevent him from talking as if he were extracting his answers from my silence. And at the end he showed me a piece of paper full of signatures, round and square seals. He patted me gently on the shoulder and once more I became aware of his great arrogance and greediness; this, he said and waved the paper before my eyes, this is worth much more than your silence.

I left him on the other shore. Strange man. I didn't understand what he wanted but he was very impressive, his insignificant appearance was hiding a determination; the world is small, death is everywhere while my wisdom was silence. I had to keep on searching. I walked on the shore for a period of time. I reached the Danube. Look, I said to myself, my course has been a circle. The circle is closed now. It is there that the sun rises. Your patience will be tried very hard. The wind was

blowing towards the delta, the sea was oozing and my nostrils were filled with the smell of sunflower oil just like the time when I was going by the Sky's Temple on my way to Vang Du's watch repairing shop and slipped a small coin to the blind man who was with a white monkey on a chain. From the monkey's elbows and knees, white tufts of hair were hanging like soft brushes or like tassels, with which the blind man would wipe now and then his empty eyes because you can turn off the eyes' light but the tears are still eternal. A gold broach, a jade leaf, the fruit, a pearl, such may be the road you have to follow. Through this you'll reach the mirror. But I was still walking along the Black Sea's bank. The sea was quiet. Could it be that the Danube's sweet silt had a positive influence? I knew that my goal was closer to me than I had thought. I walked on the shore until I almost reached one of the river's mouths. I crossed the golden beach. I passed the cemetery where Christians and Turks and Jews were buried together in peace. Dry and bleached grass stood on each side of the road leading to the first houses which looked like warehouses made of wood although a white wall shone among the rows of corn. There I met the gravedigger.

he had a reddish beard and small sparkling eyes, he was tall and strong, he looked like the god of the orthodox Christians. Which one are you? I asked him. He laughed: I am all three, Turk, and Jew and Christian, he told me. I bury the dead. Each one dies in his own creed but there is only one gravedigger. What's your name? I asked him. Antipa, he said. I said, Antipa, what sort of name is that? Just a name, he said. Later, much later, I came to a full understanding of this name. He was an old but strong man. When I was young, he said, I didn't look as I do now. I was thin and darker and I had brown eyes and hair like the horse's tail. Instead of words I was producing penetrating sounds that frightened just about everybody around me. I may be only a mythomaniac with a cracked mind but I know how to dig a grave and put a man inside. I still don't understand the change that took place in me during the second half of my life. I am no longer small, thin and dark skinned, slippery, sickly with brown, glassy eyes, like olives kept in Cyprian olive oil, who loved women and killed time. In a very short time I changed into what you see now: tall, heavy, red-skinned, my eyes' color became lighter and clear, my agility changed, I have become introspective, my bones have become bigger and heavier, my movements slower, I don't get sick, women no longer interest me, my strength has increased. I became a gravedigger. In this way I have learned almost everything.

Antipa, the gravedigger, talked to me about the city at the river's mouth, about its highest and lowest point, about the people who lived there before, and the time when in the stone house, where the officer of the Commission for the Danube had been located, there were flags from all the big countries and consuls in their grandiose attire were crossing the canal's jetty.

at about that time Antipa Sr., the gravedigger's father, came here to this porto-franco, probably from the Levant, and made this his home because it was a new world in need of new men and he went into business selling oil, lemons, cinnamon and gun powder. He must have been quite a man. And now I stare at those oxygen containers and next to them are layers of tomatoes and cabbage and in my nostrils the smell of corn oil being used to fry fish with thorny fins and the cactus will be the bee's friend one of these days and I'll begin my research once more. Look at this cloud shaped like a brain and the other like liver. The wind blows and uproots these weeds. Antipa Sr. came on the Danube inside the belly of a vessel that carries Bohemian porcelain and silver nitrate from Trieste and phosphate from Malta and holy water from Mt. Athos and fifty barrels full of rum from Jamaica for the English Consul and a box full of books belonging to a German scholar—that was the time when they were coming up the muddy canal, Greek ships and Spanish ships, and you could see bony Dutchmen with red moustaches all the way down to the jaws and Turks full of self-importance wearing their funny salvars; but they were good fighters and they had wide copper bracelets on their hands and an onyx, a ruby and three small opals in the handle of their daggers and long guns with silver butts made in Anatolia and the Greek women with their smooth skin and all the Greeks on the river bank and in the houses, the ships, the restaurant, the dice thrown against the edges of the box, talking much and quickly, selling and buying fish, wheat, fruit, rugs and amber and your eyes opened wide seeing those English steamships, tall and covered with smoke: and up there looking around with indifference and leaning over some rails a black with a gold loop in his ear, Italians and French in formal uniforms sparkling with buttons and tassels, signs of power and elegance, sewn with gold thread, Armenians and Bulgarians and a whaler's captain from New England who reached the Black Sea because of mysterious winds that the captain, his hand inside a whale's bone and thrown unwillingly at the Gibraltar, couldn't identify or manage and he let his boat be carried by the winds—but here at the Danube's mouth nobody wants his spermaceti containers.

could my long search prove to be useless? But I had to come back to where I had started, a little closer, there it was the middle spot, the beginning and the end. I found myself in an ugly town, between dry valleys under a forested mountain where I was born many years before. Here it was to happen. How I have wandered only to come back finally to Dealu-Ocua. I knew: to obtain the mirror I had to forget everything and to wait. Probably I am that butterfly of which Djuang dreamt and wondered if he dreamt of the butterfly or the butterfly dreamt of him. I withdrew to a peaceful life. I did here what I had done for seven years at the Danube's mouth but here I did it in complete oblivion. My cacti and my bees. I was not hurrying because my long preparations and my long waiting were still working to my advantage. I was the boss at the Water Tower. The pumps worked non-stop, every so often I'd lift the lids of the wells and I'd look inside the cement holes. Everything functioned independently. I was alone. It was okay. I knew that it had to happen. I did not know *how* and this created a pleasant anticipation which I was very careful to hide. They were saying about me: a peaceful man, a slow mind and a sensitive soul. How stupid and crazy they were. I spent many, very many years in this disgusting town. Long years, almost one hundred years. In order to forget and to be forgotten I didn't take up any of my old crafts. I became a gardener, a gravedigger like my old friend at the Danube's mouth. I ran a mill (a long time ago I ran a mill at the Delta, after I had closed the tea-house) and then much later I came to the Water Tower. Here I am in Paradise. My cacti are famous in the world, the grass here is greener and thicker than any I have seen anywhere, the water is sweeter, perfect quietness except for my bumble bee that saves me also from many unpleasant occurrences. Doesn't my patience indicate power as well as tyranny? But my time has finally come. Probably I could touch it by stretching my hand. Its paths are hidden. During the long wait, all I knew about myself has reversed itself in a curious way, giving birth to a new man, strong in patience, whereas I used to be weak and inconsistent. Later I saw in the great light that all I had done, even the most insignificant action has a meaning; gestures, words, modes of behavior that made me before appear scared, frightened, violent, were changing now to something else and were added to the lengthy series of proofs in support of my work.

and when it was to happen it did. The whole thing began as a joke. But I who have no time for jokes and for a life that is led astray by jokes, oh Lord, look, now I see, now I understand how time turns around, and

how always what you know turns around and you no longer know, how it turns around and nothing is left, that's right, I have to meditate, to think, to see if that was really my mistake or if this is how it had to happen and there was no mistake but one more necessary link. I may have to wait even longer with the eyes fixed on the containers full of oxygen and watching that man that now is cutting the grass and now I can see, everything started as a joke, nothing is true but I think that this, too, is one more thing, a gain, a step closer to the mirror. Because here, at Dealu-Ocna, I met Antipa, *the real* Antipa. He didn't know what power he possessed. I had to show it to him. He was the man through whom I could achieve my goal. He was no more idle despite what he appeared to be or what the others thought of him. A humble clerk hiding a great force. I did not appreciate him when I heard him telling his fellow drinkers: This man will die. How do I know? I know. And the man died in three days. He was making bets, he was playing, but I had to tell him that his game was real. He knew, he was no false prophet. He was providence. He was betting. The others in Moiselin's bar were laughing at him. But the man died. They no longer laughed. And then I started following Antipa. I became his man so that I'd make him my man. There, I said to myself, he is a man who knows how to untangle the future. It isn't just an accident and he is without any doubt the one who knows or who will come to know his own future. But what does he see? He sees death, he has the power to see when his fellowman will die. Therefore he has the power to learn when he will die too. He either has that power or I must make him discover it, I must force him to discover it. He was therefore Su Chio, the old divinator who was using tree branches to divinate; and if so, it means that he has the mirror. I finally found the way. Nothing could stop me. My conviction gave me strength. I was the one who had taught Su Chio. I realized why I didn't like the name Antipa and why I thought that it didn't fit: His real name was Su Chio. He will lead me to the mirror and the mirror will give me the freedom to use the power which is in me, the power I know I have and which needs only a push to surface. Since the true power of the mirror is inside me, the mirror is only a reflex. The lie serving the truth. My goal is to make Antipa know his own death. This will happen and the mirror will come to me. How much longer do I have to wait? One year? Ten? Fifty? A hundred years go by in a second. Fifty in less time than that. Antipa was thirty-three years old. In this region no one has lived to be a hundred in the last hundred years. Could Antipa live

that long? It means seventy years waiting. I could do it, it is as if they have gone by already. And I'll take over. When I realized that fate was at my service I wanted to know how slowly my mind works, I wanted to know how feeling my heart is and how weak my hand, comments made about me and which I sometimes believed. So, I went to kill the old woman. She lived in the outskirts of the town, next to the clay pits. Many times I had passed by her hut and used to think: you are of no use to anybody, old woman. But when I got there I found that she had died three days before. Could it be that I was mistaken and that fate was playing games with me and was not giving me a chance? Her dog was by the door of the house. A big and malicious animal it was. I killed the animal easily. A good start. The dog was the old woman, it had her eyes and her deep voice and it was even standing the way she used to sit relaxed in her chair in the summer afternoons. She was the dog the way Antipa was Su Chio.

things fall into place. Once more I am thinking of my deadly enemy. It happened a long time ago, when I was young. He wished me dead but I had to live. I had a purpose. To escape, I had to kill him. I was not succeeding. One day he left that place. I followed him because his leaving was a trick to cause my own death. I couldn't kill him. I did not hate him; he hated me. I could feel his hate like an illness. In order to free myself I had to kill him. Three whole years I was constantly near him (maybe unwillingly I was offering him the chance to kill me). I knew his habits, his gestures. I carried in my pocket a knife with a short blade, a stone and a sling. I couldn't hit him. There was always something between him and me. Then I decided that I had to free myself in a different way. I ran away, went into hiding in another town. Before a year was over my deadly enemy showed up in that town. He bought a house surrounded by a garden of grape vines. I knew that there were no more places to run to. And suddenly I forgot him. No longer did I hide, no longer was I afraid of his threats. One day I saw him dead, taken through town to a grave waiting for him, taken by his own good death. I was nearby. I felt neither bad nor good but looking at the smashed dog's head I knew that I was the one who had prepared that man's death by waiting for him patiently in the place where he was to come and remain forever. What did my waiting prove?

translated by Ioanna Deligiorgis